DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 390 609 RC 020 393

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TITLE Sociological Factors in Rural Communities That Impact the Entrance and Upward Mobility of Female Administrators and Administrative Aspirants in Public Schools.
PUB DATE Jul 94
NOTE 8p.; In: Issues Affecting Rural Communities. Proceedings of an International Conference Held by the Rural Education Research and Development Centre (Townsville, Queensland, Australia, July 10-15, 1994); see RC 020 376.
PUB TYPE Reports - Research/Technical (143) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Administrator Selection; *Community Attitudes; Elementary Secondary Education; Physical Characteristics; Promotion (Occupational); Public Schools; *Religious Factors; Rural Education; *Rural Schools; Sex Bias; Sex Role; *Sex Stereotypes; *Women Administrators

ABSTRACT

Research indicates that female teachers who attempt to enter and advance in administrative positions encounter obstacles ranging from sex-role stereotyping to direct prejudice and discrimination. While these obstacles have been researched for a number of years, there has been little focus on the barriers experienced by women in rural districts. Forty women who held administrative certificates in New Mexico, Utah, and Wyoming were interviewed. It was found that religion was much more likely to be a serious barrier for rural female administrators and aspirants than for their counterparts in urban settings. Respondents indicated that the religious affiliation of the applicant, as it compared to that of the superintendent or school board members, was very likely to influence hiring and advancement decisions. In addition, the dominant religion in rural towns tended to define roles for women in very traditional ways, and being single or divorced was seen as a tremendous liability. Respondents indicated that rural communities had clear expectations of administrators in three areas: appropriate roles, personality characteristics, and physical characteristics. For a woman to engage, or attempt to participate, in a role that was seen as "male," was clearly not acceptable in rural communities. In addition, the expectation that women should be doing "female" things was strongly held by both genders in the community. Rural communities viewed women as not being "hard" enough to deal with administrative tasks such as discipline and group management and also placed a high value on physical size and stature of the applicant. Contains 39 references. (LP)

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RC 020 343

SOCIOLOGICAL FACTORS IN RURAL COMMUNITIES THAT IMPACT THE ENTRANCE AND UPWARD MOBILITY OF FEMALE ADMINISTRATORS AND ADMINISTRATIVE ASPIRANTS IN PUBLIC SCHOOLS

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ABSTRACT

"Right after I had been hired as a principal, I came into this building ... this inspector came to look at the kitchen ... when he came out he said 'Why aren't you married and home?'" (Green #12, interview conducted in July, 1993)

"One day one of the men that was on the [selection] committee came to my room ... and he said 'Well, it would have helped if you had been male.' And I said, 'That is against the law.' And he said, 'Well, we know that you wouldn't sue us.'" (Green #13, interview conducted in July, 1993)

Women who are in administrative positions, and those who aspire to enter the administrative ranks, are highly likely to encounter barriers which range from subtle cultural prejudice to outright illegal discrimination. Identifying what those barriers are is an essential step toward removing unnecessary obstacles from the path of qualified and suitable female educators. This report begins to address the deficiency of past studies which ignored the different educational settings in which female administrative aspirants find themselves. Specifically, this qualitative study will report on

- some of the sociological factors that influence a woman's ability to enter and rise within the ranks of public school administration in rural communities.

Experiences such as those illustrated in these two "snippets" are sadly more common than many people recognize. Women who are in administrative positions, and those who aspire to enter the administrative ranks, are highly likely to encounter barriers which range from subtle cultural prejudice to outright illegal discrimination. Identifying what those barriers are is an essential step toward removing unnecessary obstacles from the path of qualified and suitable female educators.

Themes associated with women in educational administration center around three key questions: 1) why are there proportionally fewer women in administrative positions than men; 2) what contributes to gender disparity in administrative positions; and, 3) what are the current employment trends of women in educational leadership positions? Interestingly, the literature treats women and the settings in which they find themselves as though they are a monolithic group. For example, there has not been a serious investigation of the differences between working and living in a rural verses urban districts, relative to the issues surrounding female administrators and aspirants. This report begins to address the deficiency of past studies which ignored the different educational settings in which female administrative aspirants find themselves. Specifically, this study will report on some of the sociological factors that influence a woman's ability to enter and rise within the ranks of public school administration in rural communities.

THE LITERATURE

Research in the general field of women in leadership positions has achieved a high level of public awareness in certain areas such as business (for example, Morrison, White & Velsor, 1987). However, research dealing with women in educational leadership has received much less publicity. The reason this disparity is especially intriguing is that education is, and has been for decades, a profession clearly dominated (at least at the teaching level) by women. It is curious that women have been unable to achieve leadership positions in a female-dominated field to any significant degree. The relatively passive public reaction to this trend stands in stark contrast to the fervor of the emotion developed when considering female under-representation in such male-dominated areas as business, medicine and law.

In an attempt to better understand the under-representation of women in the ranks of public school administrators, the following review focuses on the following issues: 1) internal and external barriers; 2) explanatory models; 3) prejudice and discrimination; 4) networking; and, 5) mentoring.

Internal and External Barriers

The literature dealing with women in public school administration has used the distinction of internal verses external barriers as a common framing of the different types of difficulties encountered in job appointments and advancement. While the use of these terms is fairly wide-spread, precise and accepted definitions are not easily identified.

Internal Barriers. In general, internal barriers are taken to mean those obstacles which women or society create, choose, exercise and/or maintain. Examples of internal barriers presented in the research literature are: geographical mobility (Hite, Kreuger & Basom, 1994; American Association of School Administration, 1982; Biklen, 1980; Darley, 1976); role conflicts between "female" personality characteristics and "male" job expectations (Lunenburg & Ornstein, 1991; Jones & Montenegro, 1982); negative self-image (Shakeshaft, 1989, 1987, 1981); sex-role socialization (Lunenburg & Ornstein, 1991; Adkison, 1980-81); and, low career aspirations (Lunenburg & Ornstein, 1991; Marshall, 1985).

While many of these barriers are referred to as mere stereotypes or beliefs in the literature, they still exert powerful influences in the lives of many women. From the perspective of constructivism (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994; Guba & Lincoln, 1994; Guba, 1990), whether these barriers are actually "real" or not (that is, natural or fabricated) is secondary to the notion that if the individual accepts, believes and orients their life according to the barriers, then these barriers are *de facto* "real." Internal barriers, then, can and often do exert an important and powerfully negative influence on the ability of women to enter and advance in school administration, regardless of whether they are unavoidable features of nature or personal constructions of reality.

External barriers. External barriers are those curtailments on opportunity which are part of the educational or social "system", they exist outside of the control and influence of an individual administrator or administrative applicant. Among the more consistently noted external barriers are: family responsibilities (Edson, 1987; Shakeshaft, 1989; Marshall, 1985; Lange, 1983; Jones & Montenegro, 1982), lack of sponsorship or mentorship (Mitchell & Winn, 1989; Hampel, 1987; Harder & Waldo, 1983); sex-role stereotyping and discrimination (Lunenburg & Ornstein, 1991; Shakeshaft, 1989, 1981); and, lack of access to networks (Hurley, 1994; Rees, 1991; Martin & Grant, 1990; Shapiro, 1984).

Many of these external barriers are recognized as long-standing fixtures of the educational system. Yet, as in other professional settings, they staunchly persist in a social era that would seemingly render them unacceptable. Internal and external barriers, then, provide perhaps the broadest frame of reference for the issues surrounding the difficulties encountered by women as they attempt to become administrators, or move "up the ladder" in the educational system.

Explanatory Models

In an attempt to understand the structure and function of the barriers women encounter in public school administration, three basic models have been developed. Originated by Suzanne Estler (1975), and subsequently used by other researchers (Grady, 1992; Dopp & Sloan, 1986; Harder & Waldo, 1983; Lyman & Speizer, 1980), the barriers to administration have been rendered in the following models:

1- The "Women's Place" Model assumes that women are socialized differently than men, with an emphasis on role distinctions. The fact that many women choose to apply for specific types of jobs, such as elementary (young children and nurturance) verses high school (older students and discipline) principalships, is attributable to the role-distinction socialization of women.

2- The "Discrimination" Model asserts that there are direct efforts by one group (in power) to exclude another (outsiders) from participation. These efforts lead to hiring and promotional practices which favor a certain group of individuals (men) over another (women).

3- The "Meritocracy" Model declares that the most qualified applicants are hired for a given position. The fact that more men than women are hired, particularly in certain positions, means that men are simply more qualified than women.

Most research, including Estler's original paper (1975), has discredited only the meritocracy model as a legitimate possible explanation for female underrepresentation. While the "women's place" and "discrimination" models continue to have credibility, it must be kept in mind that they are not considered to be mutually exclusive descriptions of the difficulties encountered by women. In the world of complex bureaucratic and social interaction, a number of constraints might be simultaneously engaged in the hiring and promotion process. These two models should be taken as providing a potential structure in which particular barriers, such as those which follow, can be framed and engaged.

Prejudice and Discrimination

The existence of prejudice and discrimination in the hiring and advancement process against women is asserted in most of the research literature (McGrath, 1992; Martin & Grant, 1990; Edson, 1987; Biklen, 1980; Estler, 1975). Most difficulties in this area are related to social attitudes (stereotypes) about women's competency levels. As presented in Biklen (1980), women are seen as:

1- too emotional;

2- not sufficiently task-oriented;

3- too dependent;

4- lacking independence and autonomy;

5- nurturant, with the ability to follow directions in a tight, bureaucratic, hierarchical structure, but unable to construct or dominate a structure.

The practices and policies that follow quite naturally from these attitudes lead to actions by many school boards and districts which would be considered prejudicial and discriminatory. Two primary difficulties in this arena are: socialization and stereotypes are typically deeply seated in the history and structure of a given culture; and many women themselves see no difficulty with these stereotypes because they are an integrated part of the host culture that enacts and perpetuates these actions. The result is that while these practices continue to assert the largest influence on limiting women, they are the most difficult to influence or change.

Networking

As with all societies, educators tend to cluster into informal groups of affiliation. In educational administration, women consistently have difficulty entering and/or accessing the informal network(s) controlling entry and advancement (Martin & Grant, 1990; Whitaker & Lane, 1990; Gotwalt & Towns, 1986; Marshall, 1986; Edson, 1978). The result of not having access to the "good ol' boys network" is that female aspirants: lack the honest feedback necessary to improve and hone their professional skills (Pigford & Tonnsen, 1990); fail to obtain critical districtwide information concerning the "real" requirements for a position (Edson, 1978); and, experience less opportunity to display important skills, attitudes and knowledge to those who make the hiring and advancement decisions (Edson, 1978).

Exclusion from these informal networks has meaning beyond the local setting. Local networks tend to extend to regional networks, then on to national networks. When informal local networks remain unavailable to female administrators and aspirants, they are excluded from potential career enhancement and advancement at the largest geographical scale, and superintendencies are seldom accessible (Rosser, 1980).

Mentoring

While informal networks reflect the power structure at the macro level, individual mentors and sponsors can fulfill many of the same functions as networks, but at the micro level. Female administrators and aspirants, however, experience a number of difficulties that men do not. For example, since most administrators (e.g. potential mentors) are men, the issue of the appropriateness of developing close male/female relationships is of concern. Marshall (1985) points out that male mentors can be reluctant to invest their efforts with female aspirants because close male/female relationships are most often seen as unprofessional.

Thus, female mentors and sponsors would appear to be the natural answer. Unfortunately, a scarcity exists of women occupying appropriate positions in administration for mentorship (Whitaker & Lane, 1990). Whatever female mentors may be available tend to be in positions which lack influence, relative to their male counterparts (Martin & Grant, 1990).

Women, then, are in a position where they must seek out sponsors who are both willing to engage in professional relationships that have the potential of being misinterpreted and are sufficiently influential (Rees, 1991). The highly reduced pool of potential mentors available to women clearly becomes a significant problem to those who seek entry and advancement in educational administration.

SUMMARY

While women comprise the majority of teachers in the current educational system, they remain significantly under-represented in the administrative ranks. Those female teachers who attempt to enter and advance in administrative positions encounter a number of significant obstacles, ranging from sex-role stereotyping to exclusion from networks to direct prejudice and discrimination. While these obstacles have been researched for a number of years, no focus on the barriers experienced by women in rural districts has been attempted. The difficulties encountered by women must addressed at the various levels of their experience, not simply as though they are one monolithic group.

METHODS

The research being reported in this paper is an extension of an earlier census of male and female holders of administrative certificates in New Mexico, Utah and Wyoming (Hite, Kreuger & Basom, 1994). Analysis of the 2,254 respondents to this previous census indicated the need for personal interviews with female holders of certificates. An example of the findings that indicated the need for additional inquiry was that men were three times as likely as women to have received their first administrative appointment without ever once interviewing formally for the position. These types of discoveries led to the conclusion that more in-depth inquiry into the nature of the process involved in entering and advancing in the administrative ranks was justified.

Given that the intent of the extended research being described in this report was to explore the process of entry and advancement, it was determined that a qualitative approach would be most appropriate (Bogdan & Biklen, 1992; van Manen, 1990; Marshall & Rossman, 1989). A description of the basic components of this qualitative research project follows.

Sampling and Interviews

A random sample of 40 women was selected from the population of certificate holders identified in the initial study. This sample was stratified by two criteria: whether the person was currently employed as an administrator or not; and, whether the person worked in an urban or rural district. A district was determined to be rural if it met any four of the following five criteria. The district of employment must:

1- have fewer than 10,000 students;

2- not encompass a "standard metropolitan area", as defined by the 1990 U.S. Census;

3- have a human population density less than 150 persons per square mile;

4- have at least 40% of its population living in cities smaller than 5,000 persons; and/or,

5- have no four-year degree-granting institutions of higher learning within its geographical boundaries.

Once the sample was selected, an interview was scheduled at a time and location established at the convenience of the woman being interviewed. The interview was conducted by a female high school teacher and current doctoral student at Brigham Young University in educational leadership, Lillian Zarndt. Each of the interviews lasted from one to two hours, were tape-recorded, and later transcribed. The interview format was purposefully kept very simple. Each participant was asked to respond to the following questions:

For those currently employed as administrators:

1. Did you encounter any barriers while pursuing your first appointment to public school administration?

   If so, do you believe those barriers were encountered specifically because you are a woman?

   Do you believe that those barriers would have been different for a male applicant?

   If not, do you believe other female applicants experience gender-specific barriers?

   If yes, why do you believe your experience was different than other female applicants?

2. The above series of questions would next be applied to the issue of advancement.

   For those NOT currently employed as administrators:

   What do you believe were the reasons you have never been hired as an administrator?

Do you feel free to discuss any specific events that actually happened while you were interviewing that you believe demonstrate any of the reasons you have given?

Do you believe that female and male applicants are treated differently in the process of hiring administrators?

Do you believe that your experience in the hiring process was different from other female applicants?

Consistent with this semi-structured interview format, the interviewer attempted to exert as little influence on the response of the subject as possible. In addition to the interview, a brief demographic questionnaire was administered to collect information on items such as: age; number of years completed as a classroom teacher; number of years completed as an administrator; college degrees held; etc. This information was not collected to establish or enhance the generalizability of the research but rather to simply help describe the respondents.

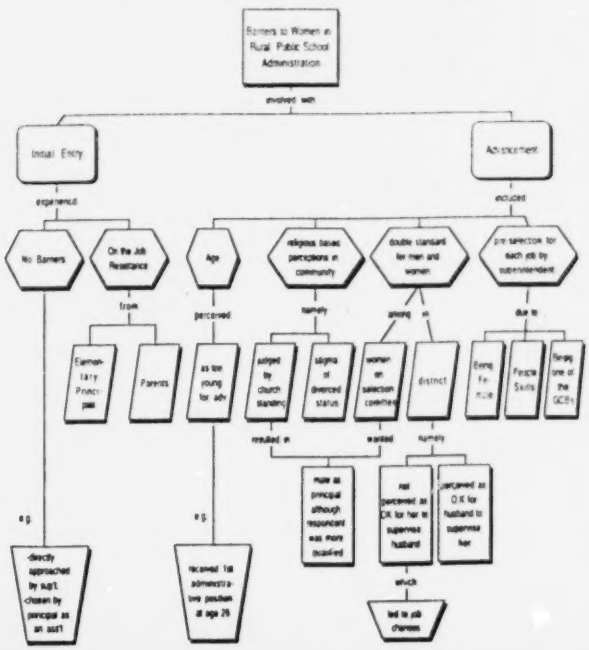
Information Analysis

The primary form of information analysis used in this study was the construction of concept maps for each of the interviews, using techniques described by Novak (1991) and Novak and Gowin (1984). Concept mapping was chosen as a reasonable way to represent the interview information, given that the main priority in this analysis was to accurately preserve the ways in which the respondents presented their own "cognitive or semantic schemata-categories of meaning" (Marshall & Rossman, 1989, p.10).

The rendering of the interviews was accomplished by a research team chosen specifically to add credibility to the accuracy of the concept maps. Given that a team comprised of individuals too much alike would increase the potential for a skewed rendering the individuals assigned to this task were: an anglo female doctoral student; an anglo female undergraduate student; an Asian Indian female doctoral student; and, an anglo male doctoral student.

The concept mapping team was required to map each interview on their own and then meet to come to agreement on a final "consensus" map. The diverse nature of the team, combined with the individual and consensus mapping exercises, created concepts maps most likely to represent the orientation of the respondents. Examples of two finalized concept maps are presented in Figures 1 and 2. The demographic information was compiled into frequency tables. Selected characteristics are presented for the interest of the reader in Table 1.

Figure 1: Concept map of the perceived barriers of a female administrator in a rural public school district



FINDINGS

The findings presented in this paper were drawn from the concept maps of the 40 interviews described earlier. The focus of the extraction of information from the concept maps was on the sociological factors mentioned by the respondents. By sociological factors we mean those things which are a clear product of the host culture such as social role expectations, as opposed to institutional factors such as availability of positions, or the meeting of state mandates. In general, the sociological factors that impact the ability of a woman to enter and advance in public school administrative positions cluster along two dimensions: religion; and, social normative expectations.

Religion

As opposed to larger urban settings, religion in rural districts is much more likely to be a serious barrier for female administrators and aspirants. Difficulties associated with religion tended to be expressed in two specific areas: denominational affiliation; and, marital and family status.

Denominational affiliation. Rural communities, as reported in this study, tended to be dominated by one, or at most two, denominations. In a rural setting the religious affiliation of the applicant, as it is compared to that of the superintendent and/or the majority (or all) of the members of the school board, was very likely to influence hiring and advancement decisions. Following are examples of the responses given in the interviews:

> "I'm a minority in a lot of ways. You know, I am not <dominant religion>, and I am a woman."
>
> (Green #1, interview conducted in July, 1993)

> "... again, I hate to keep going back to religion, but religion is an issue in a small community like this - it really it an issue."
>
> (Green #5, interview conducted in July, 1993)

> "The dominant religion right now has a high influence on who becomes an administrator. I have heard parents say 'well he's so and so in this church, so I believe what he says.' ... parents have a tendency to put more reliability on the men if they have a church position."
>
> (Green #7, interview conducted in July, 1993)

> "I'm not <dominant religion>, you know, and somehow it always comes out, it always comes out. It's real subtle how it comes out in an interview ... there's little words or little this or that, and it's real obvious that you're a member."
>
> (Green #12, interview conducted in July, 1993)

A further complication is that the dominant religion(s) in rural towns tended to define roles for women in very traditional ways. Role expectations that are promoted, sanctioned and maintained by religious belief are much more deep-rooted than roles that are an artifact of general (perhaps more cosmopolitan and urban) society. The fact that the religious influence tended to focus on traditional roles for women was also the dimension that made religion a more negative factor for women than men. A man who is not of the dominant faith, for example, does have some religious bias to overcome, but because it is deemed by the dominant religious persuasion appropriate for men to work, belonging to another denomination is not as fundamentally problematic as it is for women.

Marital and family status. The dominant religion(s) in the rural districts of this study encouraged traditional marriage relationships. Being single, or divorced, was seen as a tremendous liability. Again, this was also stated to be a problem for men, but a more powerfully negative factor for women. Among the of a female administrative aspirant in a rural public school district many responses dealing directly with marriage and family status are the following examples:

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Figure 2:

Concept map of the perceived barriers
of a female administrative aspirant in a rural public school district

"I would get hate mail, anonymous letters ... that I should be at home with my children ... [I'm] in a culture where the women are supposed to stay at home, they're supposed to be with their families, and here you've got this woman in a position of authority and they just look at you in a another way ... it had to do with religion."

(Green #1, interview conducted in July, 1993)

"Divorce plays a big factor. People look at people who are divorced and they say, 'oh, well there's a failure there for some reason.' Anyway, that's what some people have said to me. You know, I mean, they've said it right out to me."

(Green #5, interview conducted in July, 1993)

"You're not quite meeting up to standards in this area if you're not married or if you don't have kids ... that's the hardest thing to deal with in this area."

(Green #7, interview conducted in July, 1993)

The urban interviews did not indicate that marital or family status was a barrier for female administrators and applicants. This sociological phenomenon appears to be prominent only in smaller communities. A possible explanation for this observation was given by one respondent, who pointed out that in small communities people know "everything" about each other and are more interested in knowing personal details of individual lives.

Normative Dimensions

The second theme in the interviews was one of highly defined normative expectations of the rural community. Respondents indicated that their communities had clear expectations in three areas: appropriate roles; personality characteristics; and, physical characteristics.

Female appropriate roles. Perhaps the most frequent difficulty that female respondents mentioned was the common cultural expectation that men and women should be engaged in different activities. For a woman to engage, or attempt to participate, in a role that was seen as "male", was clearly not accepted. Among the many indications of this perceived problem are the following quotations:

"A salesman came to my school, and he's having this conversation with me. I though 'now, I'm missing something here.' Come to find out, he thought I was the wife of the principal who had been in charge while he'd gone to a conference ... At one point I had a parent who called and wanted to talk to the principal. I said 'this is the principal.' And he said 'oh, it's a <explicative> woman,' and he hung up."

(Green #5, interview conducted in July, 1993)

"A high school principal once said to me, 'if women would stay at home with their children, we wouldn't have problems."

(Green #10, interview conducted in July, 1993)

"A male member of our board said to one of the female members of our board, 'Why do you want to run? Wouldn't you rather be in the kitchen or bedroom where you belong?"

(Green #13, interview conducted in July, 1993)

The expectations that women should be doing "female" things was strongly held by both genders in the community. Therefore, while the negative impact of these role expectations accrued primarily to female administrators and applicants, the source of the problem was not gender specific. The pattern of both genders expecting "femaleness" was a source of great concern for the respondents.

Table 1: Selected characteristics of female administrators and administrative aspirants in rural school districts

Characteristic	Administrators	Admin. Aspirants*
Median age	46	48
Median # of years in classroom	10	15
Median year of administrative certification	1983	1988
% who filled on-site internships	70%	100%
Mean hours spent in on-site internships	154.7	280.0
Degree level		
BS/BA	0.0%	0.0%
MS/MA	88.9%	90%
EdSpec	11.1%	0.0%
EdD/PhD	0.0%	10%
School level taught, when teaching		
Elementary	50%	66.7%
Junior High/Middle School	30%	33.3%
High School	20%	0.0%

* Administrative aspirants are those female holders of valid administrative certificates who want to be administrators, but have been unsuccessful in acquiring their first appointment.

Female personality characteristics. Rural communities apparently still promulgate the notion that "little girls are sugar and spice and everything nice" and "little boys are snakes and snails and puppy-dog tails." As indicated by the following quotation, women are viewed as not being "hard" enough to deal with administrative tasks such as discipline and group management:

"He [an elementary principal] felt that a male ... had more common sense, that the people in the community could perceive a male as being more in control or better able to handle situations, more analytical."

(Red #8, interview conducted in July, 1993)

The issue does not seem to be whether the particular women applying for the position have demonstrated the ability to handle such tasks as discipline and group management, but whether women per se are suited by their natures to provide leadership in these areas. The tendency toward a commonly held set of assumptions concerning the natures of men and women, particularly the inadequate natures of women, appears to remain ingrained in the rural communities of this study.

Physical characteristics. An unanticipated finding in this study was that the physical characteristics of the women interviewed served as a focal point in a significant number of their attempts at entry and advancement in public school administration. Apparently, there is a strong tendency to believe that administrators must be physically "big", in order to successfully carry out their duties. The "double bind" of this expectation, when it is added to the traditional female role expectation is evident in the following quotations:

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"So when I went in [to the interview] he took his finger and pointed it right at my nose, and shook it, and he said, 'now you're a small person. Just what are you going to do when a mean old codger comes in and tells you that you will change something because of this and that?' Referring to my size and stature, and the fact that I was a woman. Then one of the other fellows came across with a question that was very similar ... 'you're very pretty, you know, and you're a nice, sweet person. What are you going to do when you're faced with these kinds of situations?'"

(Red #9, interview conducted in July, 1993)

"... men are really threatened because I am 6 feet 1 [inches tall], and I am very confident, and I am enthusiastic and exciting, and I do know what I'm doing ... I try very carefully to wear pink and to talk softly."

(Red #17, interview conducted in July, 1993)

The "size" issue is incredibly perplexing. How "big" a person might be is a function of genetics, not personal preference or training. It is (possibly) understandable that physical presence is considered important, given that most administrators for the past decades have been male, and therefore have been on the aggregate physically larger than an average female. This being the case, it could be argued that physical size, being one of the "common denominators" of past administration, is still an important qualification. What is confounding is why physical size would become an issue - in some interviews a central issue - in our current highly complex socio-educational setting.

SUMMARY

Female administrators, and those women who aspire to become administrators, face a formidable and perplexing array of barriers. Religious affiliation, role expectations and gender stereotypes all create obstacles to entry and advancement for women in public school administration. Why so few research efforts have focused on difficulties found in the rural setting is not clear. That there are problems for women who are affiliated specifically with rural districts is adequately demonstrated by this study.

Identifying satisfactory and equitable solutions to gender-specific barriers for women in public school administration remains a problem. While this study has contextualized the barriers in the larger literature base, and focused attention on rural districts, it has not engaged in seeking or suggesting solutions. The goal of this study was to begin rural-specific inquiry in the area of barriers for women in school administration. Perhaps simply being aware of the issues is a significant first step toward addressing the problem of inequitable treatment of women in rural public school administration.

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